The Battle of Manzikert:
A Catalyst for Decline?

A reinterpretation of the battle's contribution to the loss of Byzantium's Eastern Provinces

Sean Queenan 998364201
Instructor: Dr. Mairi Cowan
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The Battle of Manzikert and its impact on Byzantine history has been a topic of controversy for historians and can be divided into two main schools of thought. One perspective that has been commonly adopted is that the battle was one of several other factors that *contributed* to the loss of Byzantine Anatolia. This argument is voiced by numerous scholars including the great English historian, Edward Gibbon, and a more recent historian, Peter Charanis, who sums up quite neatly the idea that "Manzikert was only a battle, and battles had been lost before without the serious consequences that followed Manzikert. What explains the decline…were the conditions which came to prevail in the social and economic life of the empire in the 11th century and later. Manzikert was a result of these conditions."[1] The more commonly encountered understanding however is that Byzantine decline and loss of Anatolia was largely a *consequence* of the defeat at Manzikert. This school of thought is backed by notable historical authorities such as Alexander A. Vasiliev, who until recently, was considered the foremost authority on Byzantine history.[2] Vasiliev holds that "The battle of Manzikert in 1071 … (was) a deathblow to Byzantine domination in Asia Minor."[3]Another historian Alfred Friendly declares the battle of Manzikert in his novel, *The Dreadful Day,* as "the plunging point from which recovery for the Byzantine Empire proved to be impossible."[4] Other more contemporary sources continue this tradition, an example of which is Carter Vaughn Findley, who describes Manzikert as "a truly decisive battle, (which) broke the Byzantine border defences, opened Anatolia to Turkic in-migration and so launched a new phase in the expansion of the frontiers of Islam."[5] The problem with this interpretation however is that does not take into account the numerous factors that were weakening the Empire decades before the battle, and which continued with greater intensity after Manzikert.

The Byzantine defeat at the Battle of Manzikert, despite its catastrophic heritage, was not the cause for the Empire's sharp decline. It was not the cataclysm that led to the downfall of Byzantine hegemony in the east, but was merely the most obvious manifestation of a pattern of internal disunity and collapse that had been occurring within the Byzantine state decades before the battle. In this sense the battle must be viewed more as a symptom of earlier decline, than a cause for later weakening. This decline, the symptoms of which became most palpable at Manzikert, was caused instead by several factors that substantially weakened the Empire in the 11th century. Chief amongst these factors was political fragmentation and a series of weak emperors, the debasing of the army, the neglect of Anatolian defences, and economic stagnation. Under such conditions the relatively upstart Sultanate of the Seljuk Turks under Arp Arslan was able to defeat in battle the forces of the former-most powerful and influential medieval civilization of its time.

Despite earlier losses to the Slavs in Balkans and the Arabs in the Levant and Egypt the Byzantine Empire had experienced a military and economic rejuvenation since

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[1] Peter Charanis, "Economic Factors in the Decline of the Byzantine Empire," *The Journal of Economic History* Vol. 13, No. 4 (autumn, 1953), 414-415.
[2] Milton V. Anastos, "Alexander A. Vasiliev: A Personal Sketch," *Russian Review* Vol. 13, No.1 (January, 1954), 60.
[3] Alexander Alexandrovich Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 324-1453, Volume II* (Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin press, 1958), p. 429.
[4] Alfred Friendly, *The Dreadful Day* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1981), 17.
[5] Carter Vaughn Findley, *The Turks in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.

the 9th century. For a century and a half under the Macedonian Dynasty the Empire had been ruled by capable and outstanding Emperors such as Basil I, John Tzimisces, and lastly Basil the II. Through vigorous government, subtle diplomacy, and brilliant military leadership the Empire took the offensive; controlling the waters of the eastern Mediterranean, regaining lost ground from the Arabs, and conquering territories in the west held by the Bulgars.[6] When Basil the II died in 1025 AD, the Empire was at the peak of a Golden age of prosperity, power, and prestige. Territorially it had nearly doubled, and its power had been centralized. Despite the expensive wars the treasury held a surplus of over 200,000 pounds of gold at the end of Basils reign.[7] Under effective and unchallenged leadership, the Empire reached a new position of primacy in the medieval world.

This period of strength would however come to an end unexpectedly during the 11th century, when decades of internal conflict and weak emperors would undermine the Empires ability to repulse external threats. After the death of Emperor Basil II, "the Bulgar-slayer", in 1025 AD the Empire experienced insidious internal weakening caused chiefly by feuding noble families who all bore claims to the Imperial throne. In half a century the Imperial throne was occupied by over 14 different Emperors, whose reigns were characterized by incompetence; extravagant spending, generous imperial benefaction, and clamorous inflation of the coinage.[8] Michael Psellos, a renowned Byzantine monk, writer, philosopher, politician, historian, and contemporary source on this period, referenced to the successor emperors of Basil II in his writings:

> "Not one of the emperors in my time -- and I say this with experience of many in my life, for most of them only lasted a year -- not one of them, to my knowledge, bore the burden of Empire entirely free from blame to the end. Some were naturally evil, others were evil through their friendship for certain individuals, and others again for some other of the common reasons."[9]

The Emperors that Psellos describes were characteristically incapable of maintaining Imperial unity and authority during their reigns over feudal *magnates*, "great men," who sought to gain power the through seizure of land from small land-holders. These small landowners were often tenant farmer/soldiers who, as it will be explained later, formed the backbone of the Byzantine economy and defences in the provinces. Through the seizure of land from these farmer/soldiers the *magnates* fostered the almost wholesale loss of military small-holdings upon which the imperial defences and state taxation system rested upon.[10] What happened next could be seen as a process of decentralization as the landed aristocracy, who gained power in the provinces through such seizures of land, proceeded to clash with civil nobility of Constantinople, who had traditionally enjoyed privileges associated with heirship to the Imperial throne. Conflict between Byzantine noble families such as the Doukai, Argyros, and Komnenoi was

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[6] Charles Diehl, *Byzantium: Greatness and Decline*, Translated from the French by Naomi Walford (New New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1957), 14.
[7] Charles Diehl, *Byzantium: Greatness and Decline*, 15.
[8] Alexander Alexandrovich Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 324-1453, Vol. 1* (Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin press, 1958), p. 351.
[9] "Ancient History Sourcebook:: Michael Psellus: The Chronographia, IV, 11," Fordham University: The Jesuit University of New York, URL: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/psellus-chrono04.asp (Accessed 16th February, 2012).
[10] Georgije Ostogorski *History of the Byzantine State* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 320.

frequent and undermined the political stability of the Empire as well as the legitimacy of the Imperial title.[11] The civil nobility proved the stronger faction, and its supremacy at the capital defined the following decades with unending court intrigues and frequent usurpations of the throne that co-existed alongside a characteristic intellectual renaissance at Constantinople and a gradual undermining of Imperial military power in the provinces.[12]As it turns out, these civil wars and factionalist infighting between Byzantine nobles posed an even greater threat to the Empire than its numerous enemies who, encouraged by the evident disunity, took to marauding in Byzantine Anatolia. A contemporary Armenian historian Vardapet Aristakes Lastivertc'i described the Seljuk response to Byzantine division: "(As) soon as the (Seljuks) realized that (the Byzantine nobles) were fighting and opposing one another, they boldly arose and came against us, ceaselessly raiding, destructively ravaging."[13] This disunity and factionalism amongst the nobility at Constantinople would eventually prove to be an important factor contributing to the Byzantine defeat at Manzikert.

The decades leading up to the Battle of Manzikert witnessed a broadening debasement of the Byzantine military. This debasement would prove to have adverse effects for the Byzantine military at the battle of Manzikert. Traditionally local militias founded in and organized by separate districts, known as "*themes*," made up the bulk of Byzantine armies. These *themata* soldiers were often local salaried militias from border territories of the empire who were experienced with fighting off invaders and raiding nomads. Although the Empire continued to have a relatively effective military, especially since it retained its *cataphract* heavy cavalry and heavy infantry known as "*tagmata*," increasingly the *themata* soldiers were sidelined for foreign paid-fighters.[14] For example the Emperor Michael IV assimilated a large number of French Normans and Varangians into an army that sought to retake Sicily in 1038 AD[15]. Beginning in the early 11th century Emperors began to rely more on mercenaries and troops from client states than on *themata* soldiers, many of whom were de-commissioned. At a time when the Empire was afflicted by extravagant leadership and a continually debased coinage, the reliance on foreign troops rather than local fighters for ones defence proved to be problematic and at times simply irrational. An example of this was when the Emperor Constantine X permanently relieved around 50,000 *themes* troops, a fifth of the army, for regular cash payments in 1053[16]. These forces were locals from the province of Armenia who were reliable fighters, having successfully fought-of Turkish raids into the territory as early as 1048. By removing an important component of the defences in Armenia for financial benefits Constantine X allowed the Seljuk's to raid Byzantine territory and sack several important settlements. Despite this Constantine did nothing, continuing a pattern of incompetence and erratic rule that defined most Byzantine Emperors during the 11th century.

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[11] John J. Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee* (London: Penguin Group, 1991), 267
[12] George Ostrogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*, 321.
[13] Vardapet Aristakes Lastivertc'i. 11th century. Regarding the Sufferings Occasioned by Foreign Peoples Living Around Us. Translated by Robert Bedrosian. Published by Medieval Source Book @ http://rbedrosian.com/a1.htm pg 3 (Accessed February 15th 2012).
[14] Warren T. Treadgold, *Byzantium and its Army, 284-1081* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 28.
[15] Warren T. Treadgold, *A history of the Byzantine state and society* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 587.
[16] Warren T. Treadgold, *A history of the Byzantine state and society*, 595.

The neglect of Anatolian defences was another factor that led to Byzantine loss at Manzikert and the subsequent loss of the eastern half of the Empire. The de-militarization of many experienced *Themata* troops, and the loss of the Kingdom of Armenia as a buffer state would prove disastrous in the long-run for Byzantium, and its symptoms would manifest themselves most after Manzikert. For centuries Anatolia, otherwise known as Asia-minor, had served as the heart-land of the Byzantine Empire as its main source of military recruitment and economic revenue. The country was the prime recruiting ground for the Empires' *cataphracts*, or armoured heavy cavalry, who played a central role in Byzantine battle tactics[17]. Much of the resident populations of Anatolia were citizen farmer/soldiers who served in the ranks of the *themes*. Anatolia was at the beginning of the 11th century easily defendable. The region itself was relatively inhospitable, with dry and unwelcoming hilly terrain and valleys that were pocketed with fortified cities. These cities were garrisoned by local *themata* troops who, alongside other *themes*, formed a protective network of militarized districts that guarded against attacks penetrating into the interior.[18] These *themes*, along with the abundance of small land-holding farmer/soldiers residing in Anatolia, proved successful in keeping foreign invaders at bay since their establishment during the Isaurian Dynasty (717-802 BC). This system began to decay however by the middle of the 11th century when the Emperor's authority had been considerably undermined by the civil wars and the chaotic rise and fall of pretenders to the throne at Constantinople. Within this power vacuum aristocratic families were able to expand their own bases of influence by seizing the property of small land owners. This process quickly developed an absentee feudal nobility in the provinces. As more and more farmer/soldiers became dependants to local landed aristocrats the strength of the armed forces and system of taxation that provided revenue for the state diminished.[19] This process was most acute within the previously strong *themes* of Anatolia which were so weakened by the time of Manzikert that they could not muster enough t*hemata* troops to defend themselves. This development had decisive consequences after the battle when the Seljuk Turks, witnessing the disunity of the Empire, moved into Anatolia and met little resistance from the isolated aristocrats and their paid retainers.

An additional loss to the defensive strength of the Byzantine Empire's eastern frontier was that of the Kingdom of Armenia. This Christian state had long been on relatively good terms with the Byzantines, and possessed armies that could be relied upon to repulse invading Islamic enemies. As a Byzantine ally Armenia existed not only as effective buffer state but also as a valuable recruiting ground for the Byzantine army. However, beginning in the 1040's AD Imperial armies under Constantine IX invaded Armenia in a determined effort to annex the territory completely. The ensuing invasions devastated the countryside, estranged the local populace from cooperation, and left it effectively incapable of defending itself from raids and incursions by the Seljuk Turks who were beginning to carve out an empire from their holdings in Persia. An Armenian historian and contemporary of the period, Vardapet Aristakes Lastivertc'i, described the aftermath of the annexation: "Byzantine armies entered the land of Armenia four times in succession until they had rendered the whole country uninhabited through sword, fire,

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[17] Sean J. A. Edward, *Swarming on the battlefield: past, present, and future* (Rand Corporation, 1999), 22.
[18] Warren T. Treadgold, *Byzantium and its Army, 284-1081*, 23.
[19] George Ostrogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*, 323.

and captive taking."[20] By 1064 AD the invaluable Armenian buffer state would be rendered useless for the defence of Anatolia and, upon Seljuk invasion, would serve as a platform for further incursions into Byzantine Anatolia when the capital city of Armenia, Ani, fell to the Seljuks.

An additional factor that added to Byzantine decline was a stagnant economy that had progressively worsened under Basil II's successors. This fiscal weakness would inhibit later Emperors from recruiting able troops in the provinces to defend itself. As mentioned beforehand the staple unit of the Byzantine economy for centuries had been the small land-holding tenant farmer who also acted as a soldier in times of crisis. With the rampant seizure of land by the Byzantine aristocracy occurring unchecked, due to the weakening authority of the Emperor, this key component of a successful economic system was rapidly diminishing by the time Emperor Isaac I Komnenos unsuccessfully attempted reform from 1057 to 1059 AD. [21] Komnenos' efforts, initiated under a keen discerning of the gravity of the Seljuk threat, were unsurprisingly thwarted by massive popular, religious, and bureaucratic opposition in Constantinople as he radically tried to confiscate property and possessions of the nobility and church.

The financial disorder and stagnation of the Byzantine economy of the 11th century did not go on unnoticed. Further efforts made by successive Emperors to bring the economy back into prosperity, mostly by spending, which only caused progressive inflation and the debasement of the coinage. For example, standard *nomisma,* the value of which had been maintained for centuries, was reduced to only include a small fraction of base metal. [22]Thus the high prestige the Empires currency had previously enjoyed was lost and the upkeep of the crucially important armies became harder. Finally in an attempt to cut costs and stabilize the budget the large standing army established by Basil II was deemed expensive, unnecessary, and politically menacing by his successors. Increasingly native salaried *Themata* troops were demilitarized and substituted by foreign mercenaries with, often short-term, specific contracts.[23] Although this alleviated costs it fundamentally weakened the loyalty and efficiency of the Byzantine armies and, in the long-run, did not solve the Empires economic crisis.

What should be clear by this point is that by the time Romanos IV Diogenes took to the throne at Constantinople in 1068 the Empire's strength had, through internal decay, considerably weakened from its earlier condition at the death of Basil II in 1025. Nonetheless Romanos had, contrary to most of his predecessors, an acute understanding of the Turkish threat on the eastern borders of his Empire. Almost as soon as the Imperial crown touched his head he immediately set forth, personally attending eastern expeditions into Syria and Armenia to confront the Turks. After 3 years of rather inconclusive skirmishes Romanos decided upon a massive campaign into the east that would draw the Seljuk Sultanate into a decisive confrontation with his own forces. In the spring of 1071 Romanus assembled at Constantinople a force made up of western and eastern Byzantine *tagmatas*, conscripted Armenians, private levies from Anatolian lords,

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[20] Vardapet Aristakes Lastivertc'i. *Regarding the Sufferings Occasioned by Foreign Peoples Living Around Us*, pg 3.
[21] George Ostrogorski *History of the Byzantine State,* 339.
[22] Alan Harvey, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire, 900-1200* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) 90.
[23] Warren T. Treadgold, *Byzantium and its Army, 284-1081,* 28.

and a diverse mixture of mercenary troops from all over the medieval world. The exact size of the army is unknown. The modern interpretation is that the army most likely compromised around 40,000 men and would have likely appeared much larger with the supply train and number of other civilian units who attended it.[24] After first deceiving the Seljuk leader Alp Arslan into peace proposals Romanos marched east, with the intention of retaking captured Armenian border fortresses. Romano's however was betrayed by his own messengers who revealed the Emperor's intentions to Alp Arslan. In response the Seljuk Sultan immediately abandoned his siege of the Syrian city of Aleppo and rushed to Armenia to face Romanos. In his haste to reach Romanos in Armenia, Alp Arslan was compelled to subjugate his army to forced marches from Syria. This lowered troop moral and also reduced his force through desertions and despite recruiting additional Turks along the way, left him with only around 15,000 troops, less than half of what Romanos was bringing to bear.[25] Thus initially events were in the favour of Byzantium.

By this stage however the internal disunity and weakness of the Byzantine state began to become readily apparent. The loyalty of many of Romanos' officers was highly questionable. Treachery was most likely connected to several instances of sabotage during the campaign that, cumulating in fire that broke out amongst and destroyed many of Romanos' possessions and fine horses, alienated the Emperor from the army. Just days before the battle Joseph Tarchaniotes, commanding half of the Byzantine army, unexpectedly returned to Constantinople without taking part in battle. This action, often interpreted as an act of treachery, left Romanos with an army roughly the same size of his Turkish adversary. When the time for battle finally came on August 26, 1071 AD, two more disasters struck the army: the mercenary Normans and Frankish knights refused to fight, whilst the night before the mercenary Turkish Uz horsemen had deserted and joined the Seljuk army.

Even after the mercenary elements of the Byzantine army revealed their worth the fatal blow to Romanos' fortunes only occurred at the climax of the battle. The Turks, whist engaging the left flank of Byzantine army, surprised and routed the right flank and rushed to surround Romanos who accompanied the central vanguard of the army. Andronicus Ducas, a family member of a strong political faction at Constantinople and bitter political rival of Romanos, commanded the rearguard of the army which was in reserve. Had Andronicus charged forward to Romanos' aid at this point the battle of Manzikert would have likely been a Byzantine victory. Ducas however signalled a retreat, abandoning the rest of the army which promptly routed, and allowing the Emperor to be captured by Arp Arslan.

Yet Manzikert was not as catastrophic a battle as it has often been interpreted. As mentioned beforehand half of the campaigning Byzantine army did not even take part in the battle, whist large remnants of the defeated forces were able to withdraw safely and retreat under the cover of night.[26] Some modern estimates conclude that only around 20% of the Byzantine army was lost at Manzikert.[27] Many contemporary writers, such as Anna Comnena, regarded the battle as important, but not to the overwhelming degree that

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[24] John F. Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars* (UK: History Press, 2008), 115.
[25] George Ostrogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*, 344.
[26] Alfred Friendly, *The Dreadful Day,* 119.
[27] Paul Markham, "The Battle of Manzikert: Military Disaster or Political Failure?" August 1995, URL: http://faculty.uml.edu/ethan_spanier/Teaching/documents/TheBattleofManzikert.pdf (February 16th, 2012).

some modern historians have interpreted it to be.[28] As proof of this survival of Byzantine strength Alp Arslan released Romanos shortly after the battle, signed a treaty of non-aggression, and required no additional surrender of Byzantine territory.[29] This was hardly the expected outcome of an unstoppable conqueror over the vanquished. What instead brought about the loss of Anatolia was the rapid intensification of multiple developments that had long been weakening the Byzantine state.

After Manzikert Romanos was unceremoniously deposed and superseded by the Ducas clan, one of several political factions attempting to wrest control over the Imperial throne. This action not only nullified the non-aggression pact with Alp Arslan but also sparked yet another destructive civil war that had Byzantine aristocrats at the capital and out in the provinces fighting amongst themselves for the throne. Thus as Byzantine armies were mustered against each other the Seljuks, taking advantage of the situation, swiftly moved to defeat one by one the isolated and divided provincial Byzantine aristocrats in Anatolia. Some pretenders to the crown even transferred land to the Seljuk's for military support, an example of which was Nicephorus Botaneiates, who ceded important cities in western Anatolia such as Nicomedia and Chalcedon to Sultan Suleyman, who occupied and administered them as Botaneiates' "vassal."[30] Thus it was largely thanks to an intensification of infighting and division, a persistent political trend since the end of Basil II reign at the beginning of the 11th century, which led to the loss of Byzantine Anatolia within a decade after Manzikert.

In closing the lose of Byzantine Anatolia to the Seljuk Turks in the later half of the 11th century has been recognized by numerous historians to be the result of the strategic defeat of the Byzantines at the battle of Manzikert. However this understanding appears rather fallaciously *post-hoc* once one comes to understand that the Byzantine state had been insidiously weakening since roughly the beginning of the 11th century AD. This weakening was largely caused by decades of political fragmentation and weak rule, persistent military debasement, neglect of Anatolian defences, and economic stagnation that persisted before Manzikert and intensified after the battle. As a result of this severe weakening, and not wholly due to the defeat at Manzikert, the Byzantines offered little resistance to the Seljuks who conquered Anatolia and forever altered course of the region's history.

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[28]Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, Translated by E R A Sewter. Published as "The Alexiad of Anna Comnena," (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1960), 504-505.

29 Georgije Ostogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*, 344.

30 Georgije Ostogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*, 348.

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